

PATENT APPLICATION

SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR POSITIONING TEETH

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SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR POSITIONING TEETH

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[01] The present invention is related generally to the field of orthodontics, and more particularly to a system and a method for gradually repositioning teeth.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[02] A fundamental objective in orthodontics is to realign a patient's teeth to positions where the teeth function optimally and aesthetically. Typically, appliances such as braces are applied to the teeth of the patient by a treating orthodontist. Each appliance exerts continual forces on the teeth which gradually urge the teeth toward their ideal positions.

Over a period of time, the orthodontist adjusts the appliances to move the teeth toward their final destination.

[03] The process of attaching the braces to teeth is tedious and painful. Additionally, each visit to the orthodontist is time consuming and expensive. The process is further complicated by uncertainties in determining a final arrangement for each tooth.

Generally, the final tooth arrangement is determined by the treating orthodontist who writes a prescription. Traditionally, the prescription is based on the orthodontist's knowledge and expertise in selecting the intended final position of each tooth and without a precise calculation of forces being exerted on the teeth when they contact each other.

[04] A method to create a digital model of a patient's teeth includes creating an impression of the patient's teeth; and scanning the impression using an X-ray source to generate the digital model.

[05] Advantages of the invention include one or more of the following. The system eliminates the need to pour plaster models. The system generates the digital models independent of geometry of teeth since X-rays always pass through. The system assists with the alignment of upper and lower jaws into a bite using the scan model of a bite and allows for accurate bite alignment. Digital detailing allows a cleanup of any defects in the model. The system assists in the reconstruction of teeth in cases where they are distorted/chipped, for example. Bite articulation can be done in a virtual mode. The system can scan impressions as well as plaster models. When a prescription or other final designation is provided, a computer model can be generated and manipulated to match the prescription. The

prescription may be automatically interpreted in order to generate an image as well as a digital data set representing the final tooth arrangement.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[06] FIG. 1 is an elevational diagram showing the anatomical relationship of the jaws of a patient.

[07] FIG. 2A illustrates in more detail the patient's lower jaw and provides a general indication of how teeth may be moved by the methods and apparatus of the present invention.

[08] FIG. 2B illustrates a single tooth from FIG. 2A and defines how tooth movement distances are determined.

[09] FIG. 2C illustrates the jaw of FIG. 2A together with an incremental position adjustment appliance which has been configured according to the methods and apparatus of the present invention.

[10] FIG. 3 is a block diagram illustrating a process for producing incremental position adjustment appliances.

[11] FIG. 4 is a flow chart illustrating a process for optimizing a final placement of the patient's teeth.

[12] FIG. 5 is a flow chart illustrating a process for performing functional occlusion on the patient's teeth.

[13] FIG. 6 is a flow chart illustrating an optional process for incorporating midtreatment information to the final placement of the patient's teeth.

[14] FIG. 7 is a block diagram illustrating a system for generating appliances in accordance with the present invention.

[15] FIG. 8 is a block diagram of one scanner embodiment.

[16] FIG. 9 is a flowchart illustrating an exemplary process for treating a patient using the scanner of FIG. 8.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[17] FIG. 1 shows a skull 10 with an upper jaw bone 22 and a lower jaw bone 20. The lower jaw bone 20 hinges at a joint 30 to the skull 10. The joint 30 is called a temporomandibular joint (TMJ). The upper jaw bone 22 is associated with an upper jaw 101, while the lower jaw bone 20 is associated with a lower jaw 100.

[18] A computer model of the jaws 100 and 101 is generated, and a computer simulation models interactions among the teeth on the jaws 100 and 101. The computer simulation allows the system to focus on motions involving contacts between teeth mounted on the jaws. The computer simulation allows the system to render realistic jaw movements which are physically correct when the jaws 100 and 101 contact each other. The model of the jaw places the individual teeth in a treated position. Further, the model can be used to simulate jaw movements including protrusive motions, lateral motions, and "tooth guided" motions where the path of the lower jaw 100 is guided by teeth contacts rather than by anatomical limits of the jaws 100 and 101. Motions are applied to one jaw, but may also be applied to both jaws. Based on the occlusion determination, the final position of the teeth can be ascertained.

[19] Referring now to FIG. 2A, the lower jaw 100 includes a plurality of teeth 102, for example. At least some of these teeth may be moved from an initial tooth arrangement to a final tooth arrangement. As a frame of reference describing how a tooth may be moved, an arbitrary centerline (CL) may be drawn through the tooth 102. With reference to this centerline (CL), each tooth may be moved in orthogonal directions represented by axes 104, 106, and 108 (where 104 is the centerline). The centerline may be rotated about the axis 108 (root angulation) and the axis 104 (torque) as indicated by arrows 110 and 112, respectively. Additionally, the tooth may be rotated about the centerline, as represented by an arrow 114. Thus, all possible free-form motions of the tooth can be performed.

[20] FIG. 2B shows how the magnitude of any tooth movement may be defined in terms of a maximum linear translation of any point P on a tooth 102. Each point P1 will undergo a cumulative translation as that tooth is moved in any of the orthogonal or rotational directions defined in FIG. 2A. That is, while the point will usually follow a nonlinear path, there is a linear distance between any point in the tooth when determined at any two times during the treatment. Thus, an arbitrary point P1 may in fact undergo a true side-to-side translation as indicated by arrow d1, while a second arbitration point P2 may travel along an arcuate path, resulting in a final translation d2. Many aspects of the present invention are defined in terms of the maximum permissible movement of a point P1 induced on any particular tooth. Such maximum tooth movement, in turn, is defined as the maximum linear translation of that point P1 on the tooth which undergoes the maximum movement for that tooth in any treatment step.

[21] FIG. 2C shows one adjustment appliance 111 which is worn by the patient in order to achieve an incremental repositioning of individual teeth in the jaw as described

generally above. The appliance is a polymeric shell having a teeth receiving cavity. This is described in U.S. Application Serial No. 09/169,036, filed October 8, 1998, which claims priority from U.S. Application Serial No. 08/947,080, filed October 8, 1997, which in turn claims priority from provisional application number 06/050,352, filed June 20, 1997

(collectively the "prior applications"), the full disclosures of which are incorporated by reference.

[22]

As set forth in the prior applications, each polymeric shell may be configured so that its tooth receiving cavity has a geometry corresponding to an intermediate or final tooth arrangement intended for the appliance. The patient's teeth are repositioned from their initial tooth arrangement to a final tooth arrangement by placing a series of incremental position adjustment appliances over the patient's teeth. The adjustment appliances are generated at the beginning of the treatment, and the patient wears each appliance until the pressure of each appliance on the teeth can no longer be felt. At that point, the patient replaces the current adjustment appliance with the next adjustment appliance in the series until no more appliance remains. Conveniently, the appliances are generally not affixed to the teeth and the patient may place and replace the appliances at any time during the procedure. The final appliance or several appliances in the series may have a geometry or geometries selected to overcorrect the tooth arrangement, i.e., have a geometry which would (if fully achieved) move individual teeth beyond the tooth arrangement which has been selected as the "final." Such overcorrection may be desirable in order to offset potential relapse after the repositioning method has been terminated, i.e., to permit some movement of individual teeth back toward their precorrected positions. Overcorrection may also be beneficial to speed the rate of correction, i.e., by having an appliance with a geometry that is positioned beyond a desired intermediate or final position, the individual teeth will be shifted toward the position at a greater rate. In such cases, the use of an appliance can be terminated before the teeth reach the positions defined by the appliance.

[23]

The polymeric shell 111 can fit over all teeth present in the upper or lower jaw. Often, only certain one(s) of the teeth will be repositioned while others of the teeth will provide a base or an anchor region for holding the appliance 111 in place as the appliance 111 applies a resilient repositioning force against the tooth or teeth to be repositioned. In complex cases, however, multiple teeth may be repositioned at some point during the treatment. In such cases, the teeth which are moved can also serve as a base or anchor region for holding the repositioning appliance.

[24] The polymeric appliance 111 of FIG. 2C may be formed from a thin sheet of a suitable elastomeric polymer, such as Tru-Tain 0.03 in, thermal forming dental material, available from Tru-Tain Plastics, Rochester, Minnesota. Usually, no wires or other means will be provided for holding the appliance in place over the teeth. In some cases, however, it will be desirable or necessary to provide individual anchors on teeth with corresponding receptacles or apertures in the appliance 100 so that the appliance can apply an upward force on the tooth which would not be possible in the absence of such an anchor.

[25] FIG. 3 shows a process 200 for producing the incremental position adjustment appliances for subsequent use by a patient to reposition the patient's teeth. As a first step, an initial digital data set (IDDS) representing an initial tooth arrangement is obtained (step 202). The IDDS may be obtained in a variety of ways. For example, the patient's teeth may be scanned or imaged using X-rays, three dimensional X-rays, computer-aided tomographic images or data sets, or magnetic resonance images, among others. The teeth data may be generated by a non destructive scanner, such as the scanner of FIG. 8, or alternatively, can be generated by a destructive scanner, as described in the incorporated-by-reference U.S. Applications.

[26] The IDDS is then manipulated using a computer having a suitable graphical user interface (GUI) and software appropriate for viewing and modifying the images. More specific aspects of this process will be described in detail below.

[27] Individual tooth and other components may be segmented or isolated in the model to permit their individual repositioning or removal from the digital model. After segmenting or isolating the components, the user will often reposition the tooth in the model by following a prescription or other written specification provided by the treating professional. Alternatively, the user may reposition one or more teeth based on a visual appearance or based on rules and algorithms programmed into the computer. Once the user is satisfied, the final teeth arrangement is incorporated into a final digital data set (FDDS) (step 204). The FDDS is used to generate appliances that move the teeth in a specified sequence. First, the centers of each tooth model may be aligned using a number of methods. One method is a standard arch. Then, the teeth models are rotated until their roots are in the proper vertical position. Next, the teeth models are rotated around their vertical axis into the proper orientation. The teeth models are then observed from the side, and translated vertically into their proper vertical position. Finally, the two arches are placed together, and the teeth models moved slightly to ensure that the upper and lower arches properly mesh

together. The meshing of the upper and lower arches together is visualized using a collision detection process to highlight the contacting points of the teeth.

[28] Based on both the IDDS and the FDDS, a plurality of intermediate digital data sets (INTDDSSs) are defined to correspond to incrementally adjusted appliances (step 206).

Finally, a set of incremental position adjustment appliances are produced based on the INTDDs and the FDDS (step 208).

[29] In step 204, final positions for the upper and lower teeth in a masticatory system of a patient are determined by generating a computer representation of the masticatory system. An occlusion of the upper and lower teeth is computed from the computer representation; and a functional occlusion is computed based on interactions in the computer representation of the masticatory system. The occlusion may be determined by generating a set of ideal models of the teeth. Each ideal model in the set of ideal models is an abstract model of idealized teeth placement which is customized to the patient's teeth, as discussed below. After applying the ideal model to the computer representation, and the position of the teeth is optimized to fit the ideal model. The ideal model may be specified by one or more arch forms, or may be specified using various features associated with the teeth.

[30] FIG. 4 illustrates a process 300 which optimizes the final placement of the teeth based on teeth features. First, the process 300 automatically or, with human assistance, identifies various features associated with each tooth to arrive at a model of the teeth (step 302). An ideal model set of teeth is then generated either from casts of the patient's teeth or from patients with a good occlusion (step 303).

[31] From step 302, the process 300 positions the model of the teeth in its approximate final position based on a correspondence of features to the ideal model (step 304). In that step, each tooth model is moved so that its features are aligned to the features of a corresponding tooth in the ideal model. The features may be based on cusps, fossae, ridges, distance-based metrics, or shape-based metrics. Shape-based metrics may be expressed as a function of the patient's arches, among others.

[32] For example, cusp features associated with each tooth may be used. Cusps are pointed projections on the chewing surface of a tooth. In a detection stage, a possible cusp is viewed as an "island" on the surface of the tooth, with the candidate cusp at the highest point on the island. "Highest" is measured with respect to the coordinate system of the model, but could just as easily be measured with respect to the local coordinate system of each tooth. The set of all possible cusps is determined by looking for all local maxima on the tooth model that are within a specified distance of the top of the bounding box of the model. First, the

highest point on the model is designated as the first candidate cusp. A plane is passed through this point, perpendicular to the direction along which the height of a point is measured. The plane is then lowered by a small predetermined distance along the Z axis. Next, all vertices connected to the tooth and which are above the plane and on some connected component are associated with the candidate cusp as cusps. This step is also referred to as a flood fill step. From each candidate cusp point, outward flooding is performed, marking each vertex on the model visited in this manner as part of the corresponding candidate cusp. After the flood fill step is complete, every vertex on the model is examined. Any vertex that is above the plane and has not been visited by one of the flood fills is added to the list of candidate cusps. These steps are repeated until the plane is traveled a specified distance.

[33] After the detection stage, the cusp detection process may include a rejection stage where local geometries around each of cusp candidates are analyzed to determine if they possess non-cusp-like features. Cusp candidates that exhibit non-cusp-like features are removed from the list of cusp candidates. Various criteria may be used to identify non-cusp-like features. According to one test, the local curvature of the surface around the cusp candidate is used to determine whether the candidate possesses non-cusp-like features. Alternatively, a measure of smoothness is computed based on the average normal in an area around the candidate cusp. If the average normal deviates from the normal at the cusp by more than a specified amount, the candidate cusp is rejected.

[34] Next, the process 300 computes an orthodontic/occlusion index (step 306). One index which may be used is the PAR (Peer Assessment Rating) index. In addition to PAR, other metrics such as shape-based metrics or distance-based metrics may be used.

[35] The PAR index identifies how far a tooth is from a good occlusion. A score is assigned to various occlusal traits which make up a malocclusion. The individual scores are summed to obtain an overall total, representing the degree a case deviates from normal alignment and occlusion. Normal occlusion and alignment is defined as all anatomical contact points being adjacent, with a good intercuspal mesh between upper and lower buccal teeth, and with nonexcessive overjet and overbite.

[36] In PAR, a score of zero would indicate good alignment, and higher scores would indicate increased levels of irregularity. The overall score is recorded on pre- and posttreatment dental casts. The difference between these scores represents the degree of improvement as a result of orthodontic intervention and active treatment. The eleven components of the PAR Index are: upper right segment; upper anterior segment; upper left

segment; lower right segment; lower anterior segment; lower left segment; right buccal occlusion; overjet; overbite; centerline; and left buccal occlusion. In addition to the PAR index, other indices may be based on distances of the features on the tooth from their ideal positions or ideal shapes.

[37] From step 306, the process 300 determines whether additional index-reducing movements are possible (step 308). Here, all possible movements are attempted, including small movements along each major axis as well as small movements with minor rotations. An index value is computed after each small movement and the movement with the best result is selected. In this context, the best result is the result that minimizes one or more metrics such as PAR-based metrics, shape-based metrics or distance-based metrics. The optimization may use a number of techniques, including simulated annealing technique, hill climbing technique, best-first technique, Powell method, and heuristics technique, among others. Simulated annealing techniques may be used where the index is temporarily increased so that another path in the search space with a lower minimum may be found. However, by starting with the teeth in an almost ideal position, any decrease in the index should converge to the best result.

[38] In step 308, if the index can be optimized by moving the tooth, incremental index-reducing movement inputs are added (step 310) and the process loops back to step 306 to continue computing the orthodontic/occlusion index. Alternatively, in the event that the index cannot be optimized any more, the process 300 exits (step 312).

[39] Turning now to FIG. 5, a process 320 for performing functional occlusion is shown. Functional occlusion is a process for determining how well the teeth fit together when the jaws move. The process 320 first acquires tooth/arch jaw registration. This may be done using conventional techniques such as X-ray, a computer tomography, or a mechanical device such as a face bow transfer.

[40] After acquiring the registration information, the process 320 places digital dental models of the teeth in a digital articulation simulator (step 324). The articulation simulator allows a subset of jaw movements such as bite-movements to be simulated, as described below.

[41] From step 324, the process 320 simulates jaw motions (step 326). A simplified set of movement physics (kinematics) is applied to the dental models. The process 320 performs a simulation using a simplified set of interacting forces on the jaws 100 and 101 in relation to one another. The simplified physical simulation allows the system to focus on motions involving much contact between the jaws. The physical simulation allows the

system to render realistic physically correct jaw movements when the jaws 100 and 101 come into contact with each other.

[42] A range of simulated motion may be supplied using a library of motions. One typical motion supplied by the library is a protrusive motion where the lower jaw 101 is moved forward and backward to bring the front teeth on both jaws into contact with each other. Another motion is a lateral motion found in food chewing. The lateral motion involves moving the jaws 100 and 101 side to side. Other motions that may be supplied in the library include motions that are "tooth guided" where the path of the lower jaw 100 is guided by the teeth in contact with each other.

[43] Next, the process 320 adjusts the final position based on contacts observed during the simulation of motions in step 326 (step 328). The result of the simulation is analyzed, the position of each tooth can be adjusted if contacts associated with that tooth are deemed excessive.

[44] Finally, based on the contact data generated, the process determines whether additional motion simulations need to be done. The motion simulation may be rerun until the contacts associated with each tooth are acceptable to the treating orthodontist. The tooth model manipulation process can be done subjectively, i.e., the user may simply reposition teeth in an aesthetically and/or therapeutically desired manner based on observations of the final position or based on the simulation of contacts. Alternatively, rules and algorithms may be used to assist the user in repositioning the teeth based on the contacts. If the simulation needs to be repeated, the process loops back to step 326 (step 330). Alternatively, the process exits (step 332).

[45] FIG. 6 shows an optional process of 340 of incorporating midtreatment information to the final positioning process. First, a digital model incorporating dental information associated with the patient is generated from a scan of the patient's teeth (step 342). The scan may be performed using casts, X-rays or any of the conventional scanning methods.

[46] Next, the digital model is segmented into one model for each tooth (step 344). Each tooth is then matched against a model associated with a prior scan developed at the beginning of the treatment plan (step 346). The matching process is based on matching corresponding points between the current scan and the prior scan of the teeth. In most cases, the teeth segmented from the current scan retain the shapes determined at the beginning of the treatment plan, and the matching process is easy because the models should be similar to each other.

[47] A final position transform is then applied to the new teeth model (step 348). The final position and specification from the prior model is copied to the current model of the patient, and the final position is adjusted based on the new models, the new X-ray information and a new prescription (step 350). Step 350 basically involves rerunning the minimization process 300 (FIG. 4) described previously with the new information, which may be a slight change in the model, a change in the X-ray scan, or a change the prescription. Finally, the process 340 exits (step 352).

[48] FIG. 7 is a simplified block diagram of a data processing system 500. Data processing system 500 typically includes at least one processor 502 which communicates with a number of peripheral devices over bus subsystem 504. These peripheral devices typically include a storage subsystem 506 (memory subsystem 508 and file storage subsystem 514), a set of user interface input and output devices 518, and an interface to outside networks 516, including the public switched telephone network. This interface is shown schematically as "Modems and Network Interface" block 516, and is coupled to corresponding interface devices in other data processing systems over communication network interface 524. Data processing system 500 may include a terminal or a low-end personal computer or a high-end personal computer, workstation or mainframe.

[49] The user interface input devices typically include a keyboard and may further include a pointing device and a scanner. The pointing device may be an indirect pointing device such as a mouse, trackball, touchpad, or graphics tablet, or a direct pointing device such as a touchscreen incorporated into the display. Other types of user interface input devices, such as voice recognition systems, may be used.

[50] User interface output devices may include a printer and a display subsystem, which includes a display controller and a display device coupled to the controller. The display device may be a cathode ray tube (CRT), a flat-panel device such as a liquid crystal display (LCD), or a projection device. The display subsystem may also provide nonvisual display such as audio output.

[51] Storage subsystem 506 maintains the basic programming and data constructs that provide the functionality of the present invention. The software modules discussed above are typically stored in storage subsystem 506. Storage subsystem 506 typically comprises memory subsystem 508 and file storage subsystem 514.

[52] Memory subsystem 508 typically includes a number of memories including a main random access memory (RAM) 510 for storage of instructions and data during program execution and a read only memory (ROM) 512 in which fixed instructions are stored. In the

case of Macintosh-compatible personal computers the ROM would include portions of the operating system; in the case of IBM-compatible personal computers, this would include the BIOS (basic input/output system).

[53] File storage subsystem 514 provides persistent (nonvolatile) storage for program and data files, and typically includes at least one hard disk drive and at least one floppy disk drive (with associated removable media). There may also be other devices such as a CD-ROM drive and optical drives (all with their associated removable media). Additionally, the system may include drives of the type with removable media cartridges. The removable media cartridges may, for example be hard disk cartridges, such as those marketed by Syquest and others, and flexible disk cartridges, such as those marketed by Iomega. One or more of the drives may be located at a remote location, such as in a server on a local area network or at a site on the Internet's World Wide Web.

[54] In this context, the term "bus subsystem" is used generically so as to include any mechanism for letting the various components and subsystems communicate with each other as intended. With the exception of the input devices and the display, the other components need not be at the same physical location. Thus, for example, portions of the file storage system could be connected over various local-area or wide-area network media, including telephone lines. Similarly, the input devices and display need not be at the same location as the processor, although it is anticipated that the present invention will most often be implemented in the context of PCS and workstations.

[55] Bus subsystem 504 is shown schematically as a single bus, but a typical system has a number of buses such as a local bus and one or more expansion buses (e.g., ADB, SCSI, ISA, EISA, MCA, NuBus, or PCI), as well as serial and parallel ports. Network connections are usually established through a device such as a network adapter on one of these expansion buses or a modem on a serial port. The client computer may be a desktop system or a portable system.

[56] Scanner 520 is responsible for scanning casts of the patient's teeth obtained either from the patient or from an orthodontist and providing the scanned digital data set information to data processing system 500 for further processing. In a distributed environment, scanner 520 may be located at a remote location and communicate scanned digital data set information to data processing system 500 over network interface 524.

[57] Fabrication machine 522 fabricates dental appliances based on intermediate and final data set information received from data processing system 500. In a distributed

environment, fabrication machine 522 may be located at a remote location and receive data set information from data processing system 500 over network interface 524.

[58] Fig. 8 shows one embodiment of the scanner 520 of Fig. 7. A scanner 800 is

an X-ray scanner. The scanner 800 has a rotating table 804 including a table top that has sufficient space for one or two impressions 810 to rest on it. The impression 810 can be irradiated by a flat fan-shaped X-ray beam 803 emitted by an X-ray source 802. The radiation is swept by the impression 810 and passes through a scintillator 812. Radiation transmitted by the scintillator 812 is measured by an X-ray detector 820. The detector 820 performs an analog to digital conversion and provides this information to a computer 822.

The computer 822 captures on cross sectional scan and instructs the rotating table 804 to rotate to its next position and another scan is performed until the entire impression 810 is scanned. The X-ray source 802, the scintillator 812, the detector 820 and the rotatable table 804 thus obtains an image of a cross-section of (a part of) the impression 810 by computer tomography (CT). The CT system scans impressions of patients' teeth and eliminates the need to create a plaster model for each jaw. Software on the computer 822 automatically extracts a positive model out of the scan data. The upper and lower jaw will then be put together using the information from the scan data of a wax bite. In one embodiment, the scanner 800 utilizes a technique called "cone beam reconstruction."

[59] Fig. 9 shows one process 900 for digitally scanning and generating a model of the patient's teeth for treatment. The process 900 is as follows:

[60] 1. Impression of a patient is taken in a plastic tray (902).

[61] 2. A bite of the patient will be taken. A suitable material for capturing the bite is PVS material in order to capture detailed tooth geometry. Wax bites may also be used but results can be worse based on definition on the bite (904).

[62] 3. The upper, lower and the bite will be scanned together in the CT machine (906).

[63] 4. Once scanned, the upper and lower impression scanned data is digitally reversed to make a positive. This is done by identifying the inner most surface of the impression material and extracting it from the rest of the data using a largest connected component algorithm (908).

[64] 5. Once the upper and lower data is obtained, they will be aligned into a bite position using the bite material scanned (910).

[65] 6. The models are digitally detailed. Any excess material or defects in the material will have to be cleaned up (process is known as detailing) (912).

[66] 7. Once the models are cleaned, the final bite needs to be set. Models are articulated by an operator till the relative position closely resembles that of the actual mouth (914).

[67] 8. The model is now ready for treatment. The teeth are already cut as part of the detailing operation (916).

[68] Various alternatives, modifications, and equivalents may be used in lieu of the above components. Although the final position of the teeth may be determined using computer-aided techniques, a user may move the teeth into their final positions by independently manipulating one or more teeth while satisfying the constraints of the prescription.

[69] Additionally, the techniques described here may be implemented in hardware or software, or a combination of the two. The techniques may be implemented in computer programs executing on programmable computers that each includes a processor, a storage medium readable by the processor (including volatile and nonvolatile memory and/or storage elements), and suitable input and output devices. Program code is applied to data entered using an input device to perform the functions described and to generate output information. The output information is applied to one or more output devices.

[70] Each program can be implemented in a high level procedural or object-oriented programming language to operate in conjunction with a computer system. However, the programs can be implemented in assembly or machine language, if desired. In any case, the language may be a compiled or interpreted language.

[71] Each such computer program can be stored on a storage medium or device (e.g., CD-ROM, hard disk or magnetic diskette) that is readable by a general or special purpose programmable computer for configuring and operating the computer when the storage medium or device is read by the computer to perform the procedures described. The system also may be implemented as a computer-readable storage medium, configured with a computer program, where the storage medium so configured causes a computer to operate in a specific and predefined manner.

[72] Further, while the invention has been shown and described with reference to an embodiment thereof, those skilled in the art will understand that the above and other changes in form and detail may be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the following claims.